Michelle McEwen

Delicious Dangerous

Acknowledgements

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"Delicous Dangerous" published in Ocho #27
"The Browning of Cousin Tippy" published on UmbrellaJournal.com
"Like Magnolia" published in Ocho #27
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poems

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Good as Gone

Lending you my ear
between the sheets

hanging on the line, you
tell me about the first time

you did it— the pump and
the push of it; the ache

in your thighs afterward.
A good ache, you said,

like how they stung
after we ran for miles

trying to get to the end
of that all but washed-up

rainbow. That was fun, but
we don't believe in that

sort of junk no more. We are
ripe now; you with your history

of first-times; me with my bra
straps cutting into flesh. Us

with our heads loaded
with what Mrs. Puh-chin-nick said

about those bombs and how
if one should hit New York,

we here in Connecticut
would be as good as gone.

Blood

There is always a leader amongst them—
the girl-cousins. She is the one who is allowed
to sit at the table with the aunts-mothers-wives—
trusted with the big knife when it comes time
to slice the watermelon. She is the one
who bleeds first. The one the aunts talk
about in smile-heavy whispers: they say
she will be knocked-up before she knows it,
before that chapter is even gotten ‘round
to in health class. It is she who makes
her boy-cousins wish blood wasn’t as thick
as all that.

In vacation photos, she smiles the hardest—
hands on hips, head to one side, hair hanging;
hickies trophy-shiny in the sun. She is the one
who makes out with the local kid before
the trip ends. And when she promises to keep
in touch, you can almost see the bolding-&-italicizing
of her "I will"s and “I swear”s.

The aunts try not to smile when they say
that girl is going to mess around and get
killed by some man one of these days. She is
the one who notices, first, the fresh blood
staining your bikini bottom. Taking you by the hand,
she drags you out from the water, leads you
to the ladies' room as though you are not the same
age as her, as though she is already somebody's
mother.

Delicious Dangerous

Summers found her
on the front stoop, scissors in hand—
turning her winter jeans into cut-offs
which she rolled up to make extra
short. Sometimes she, Liz, threatened to turn
the scissors on her hair and chop
of all that blonde. Besides, she said,
she'd be much cooler without all that hair, but
her mother said that's what shade is for. Liz
would've gotten a beaten if she ever cut
her hair. Actually, she got beat for the littlest
things. Once, she got caught talking
to a black guy in the park— her mother
and big-brother both beat her for that; said
the only blacks she could hang around
was us— which meant me, my three sisters, my
mother and father. We weren't as black
as the Judkins in apt. three-oh-four her brother said and so
she was allowed to hang with us and we were allowed
to braid her hair and feed her. We didn't even mind it
when the black guys we wanted fell for her
instead. It's the Portuguese she gets from her daddy,
ma said, that drives the black guys to
her. But I knew what it really was— it was her
bright pink pout, rolled-up cut-offs, and
boy-handprints that lingered dangerously
and deliciously on her flesh long after
the boys had left; that's what kept them coming
back, even when her big-brother paraded his gun from
his bedroom window, even when her mother's brother made it clear
he wouldn't hesitate to run his Trans Am
over every single one of them.

The Browning of Cousin Tippy

While your mother is down
in Fayetteville, you play
in the sun; you let

those mean-well rays
find you, linger on
your collarbone & brown

the lion-color of
your thighs, toes,
knees, neck, face; sliver of
belly. By tomorrow

you will be
the brown old rough
shade of bruises or barbwire & when

your mother gets home,
you will have to stay inside
until you are the fine, full

shade of lion again.

Like Magnolia

I was on that bridge
with him— not on that day, but

months before when the weather
was cooler and the sky was jet black

well before supper time. I was tugging
on his belt loops and he was whistling

like everything was okey-dokey
in the world. But things were not.

And yet we had plans. We were
going to quit this place, this dust-hazy

place where the wind's got ears, where
the sun's got eyes, where the trees'

got tattoos— those sweetheart tattoos:
Lula loves Floyd, Jesse-Joe belongs to

Willie-Mae. We, Billie-Joe & me,
couldn't do that to a tree. We had to keep

it to ourselves— sneaking off
to that bridge when the sun nodded

off and the folks, too. The last time
we met on that bridge was, like I said,

months before that day when he threw
himself into the river the way his daddy

would have surely thrown him if he
had known what his boy was up to with me!

Like Magnolia

And yet we had dreams. The real kind—
with dates and maps and names for baby.

I even carried a list of those names
in my pocketbook— the inside zipper

so I wouldn't forget. Would give (gave) her
a sweet and living name like Magnolia.

And no one knew but him and me all what grew
inside of me. And he was happy, too, up until

the time got close. He chickened out—
had to go and throw himself over. I know

when he done it he was thinking about me,
about how he used to suck slow my ittie bittie

brown-girl titties.

Thirteen

1988, we are at that age—
thirteen. Some of us
lipstick'd, some of us bra-strap queens.
Find us in the supermarket, the feminine aisle—
& not for our mothers. Thirteen— we are
on our beds, on our stomachs,
on the telephone talking in the voices we save
for our boys— the boys we shoplift for,
the boys we linger in the hallways for. Thirteen—
some of us real mean & taller than our folks.
Too grown. Ready for going steady. Thirteen.
Tiptoeing in after dark, turtlenecks in summer
to hide love marks.

Sixteen

Driving through downtown looking up
at the G. Fox, I wish myself inside. Come sixteen,
I want to work there on the perfume-floor
with the slender girls who tuck in their blouses
and nip nylon runs in the bud with clear
nail polish: bending over, dabbing on, fanning dry.

From the backseat, I tell you as much. Half-
listening as you drive, you speak roughly to me; inform
me that G. Fox won't be around by the time I'm sixteen—
what with the world in the state it's in. You bring up

missiles and where they are pointed. But I don't want
to think about that, all I want is to work in G. Fox
getting discounts on perfume for ma and cologne
for you, daddy. I'd get off at closing time and catch

the S bus home. Baby, you say, this world is
coming to an end and you mean it— so sure
G. Fox will be blown to bits and I won't even get
to see sixteen.

Let us Go

We snap on our bathing suits, get
our bicycles out the shed. Daddy pumps air

into our tires and off we ride – twin sisters –
to the pool for the first time on our own. Daddy knows

we can't swim— doesn't want to let us go, but we are
thirteen and should be, ma says, bleeding

any day now. We take the long way
there— down Blue Hills, up Rockwell, a right

on School Street, a left on Park Ave.
where the pool is. We know we won't swim:

will just park our bikes and splash
around a bit— just enough to come out

chlorine'd & cool.

Later, in our together-solitude, covered
in pool-smell, we race home— taking the short way

up Wintonbury, hurrying before the scent
dies— eager for daddy to fill his nose with it.

Bathing Suit

I saw you
in a box
at the summer
tag sale held
at the synagogue—
pubescent
pink & extra
small, you
threw me all
the way back
to junior high

July

The baby came
home in July—
right in the middle
of summertime,
just in time
for kitchen flies &
butterflies & wild
blueberries for
the pies that never
get made because it is
too hot to bake, too hot
to be messing around
with some oven. Look how
everything's ripening, how
everything's melting—
just like the butter
left out all day
on the counter. Da
says we can't afford
to let butter melt. Ma says
it's just butter—
and the falling out
begins, will last
all summer. Da always loses
his cool in July; gets hot-
blooded when he can't sleep off
the heat. Makes like
he's smoking no more; says
it's a breeze
being cigarette-less
and a father now
of four girls. But
there is never ever enough
shade. Ma could use a maid,
but we don't have
it made, so she keeps
a tight hold
on the four of us
because
the boys on our street
can't wait for us to get older.

Bio

Michelle McEwen, poet and storyteller, has had work published in *Poets/Artists, The Caribbean Writer, The Best New Poets 2007*, and *Woman's Work* (a short story anthology). In 2009, her poem "Sucker" was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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